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ABSTRACT

Walter Dean Myers has gained distinction as an insightful and entertaining writer of imaginative adolescent literature that breaks stereotypes, tells stories of Blacks as people with complex dimension, and redefines the images of African Americans. Myers has written historical works, biography, novels for adolescents, plays, historical fiction, and mystery adventure. He is noted for: the emphasis he places on positive characters while overlooking neither negative ones nor reality; the range of dialects in his dialog; the different aspects of "coming of age" he addresses; and the manner in which he presents characters making choices. In contrast to stereotypical images of inner city African-American males, Myers presents a number of fathers who are positive role models. He is important not so much for the range of his writing as for presenting the story of African Americans in realistic but hopeful ways. Myers' message to young adults seems to be: discover your strengths, be proud of who you are and be responsible for your actions. (RS)

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# Now Is Their Time! Adolescents Learn Skills and Values Through Walter Dean Myers' Books "Coming of Age: Relationships and Values"

Patricia Duncan and Alan McLeod

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**Now Is Their Time! Adolescents Learn Skills and Values Through Walter Dean Myers' Books**
"Coming of Age: Relationships and Values"

Patricia Duncan and Alan McLeod

Pat and I have been enchanted and intrigued for several years by the variety and substance of the writings of Walter Dean Myers, and in observing student response to his novels. In fact, yesterday we observed about 200 youngsters as they listened raptly to his remarks, and then engaged in asking questions about his books, his family, and himself.

Walter Dean Myers has gained distinction over the past twenty years as an insightful and entertaining writer of imaginative literature appealing to adolescents. He, among such authors as Virginia Hamilton, Mildred Taylor, Alice Childress, Sharon Bell Mathis, and Kristin Hunter, has been breaking stereotypes, telling stories of Blacks as people with complex dimension, and redefining images of African-Americans. Further, to our knowledge, Myers remains the only African-American male writing consistently for and about adolescents.

Myers is remarkable for his range of writing, which includes history (Now Is Your Time! The African American Struggle for Freedom), biography (Malcolm X: By Any Means Necessary), novels for adolescents, plays, historical fiction, mystery adventure. He is remarkable as well for the emphasis he places on positive characters while overlooking neither negative ones nor reality; for the range of dialects in his dialog; for the different aspects of "coming of age" he addresses; for the manner in which he presents characters making choices. In contrast to stereotypical images of

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inner city African-American males, Myers presents a number of fathers who are positive role models. His characters are authentic and share the qualities and concerns of all human beings. He is important not so much for the range of his writing as for presenting the story of African-Americans in realistic but hopeful ways.

In The Young Landlords, for instance, he has a group of teenagers seeking to make their neighborhood a better place in which to live. In Motown and Didi, the main characters not only fall in love but fight evil forces, with Motown striving to defend the defenseless. In Crystal, a black model tries to decide for what kinds of pictures she should pose. In Fallen Angels, it is mutual dependence more than race that is paramount in the integrated Army in Vietnam.

Myers range is further revealed in a play, a fantasy, and two different types of humor novels. The play "Cages" examines what it is to be free, showing how we often trap ourselves through our own fears, and in so doing allow others to determine our destinies.

In the fantasy The Legend of Tarik Myers presents a "medieval" African knight in a series of growing up and good vs. evil encounters, coming to a realization that vengeance creates despair as well as triumph.

The Mouse Rap, a humorous mystery, is an intergenerational story. Myers places six Harlem youths, having learned of a fortune buried after a 1930's bank heist, spending the summer in a series of adventures seeking the fortune with the aid and advice of Gramps and his friend, Sam.

The Righteous Revenge of Artemis Bonner, a western adventure with rollicking events and wild chases ranging across the west and from Mexico to Alaska in the 1880s, pits Artemis Bonner, a fifteen year-old sign painter from New York, against the infamous Catfish Grimes and Lucy Featherdip. In New Mexico Artemis is joined by twelve year old Frolic, purportedly half Cherokee, who is also from back East.

Myers is said to have been motivated to write because of the scarcity in his youth of books about Black children and adolescents and their experiences. Rudine Sims Bishop, in Presenting Walter Dean Myers (1991), claims Myers' books "offer a mirror in which Black readers can see themselves and their lives accurately reflected" and "non-Black readers can enter a world different from and yet similar to their own." (p. x)

**Authentic Characters.** Although Myers' fictional characters are urban and primarily African-American, their thoughts and actions appeal to adolescent readers across cultural boundaries. A white teenager recently prefaced his remarks about Scorpions by saying that "...It's my favorite of all his books because Jamal and Tito are so real." Jamal must deal with the machismo of gang life, the danger of possessing a weapon and the problems of a dysfunctional family. His only comfort is the unconditional support of his friend, Tito.

Jamal is a prototype for Myers' characters. His young men and women have serious and legitimate problems living in the big city. Family support systems are typically complex, but they reflect love and concern. Although the characters confront harsh truths of

inner city experience, they seem to reflect innocence--as though Myers would like his characters to have a taste of youth before facing the responsibilities of adulthood.

In Crystal the character by the same name must face the reality of the seamier side of the modeling world. Crystal is pushed by her ambitious mother who is living vicariously through her daughter. In spite of this undesirable encouragement, Crystal is surprised by her own sensuality and realizes that to exploit her looks at her age means forsaking the normal life of a high school student. Crystal tries to explain the confusion she feels as she tells her father:

> "I was supposed to be pretty, and I was supposed to be a little sexy, I guess. It was like there were two of me. A real me underneath and an outside me that was pretty and sexy. Then, after a while, the outside part just seemed to get more and more important until it was the only thing that mattered."
>
> "You don't have to be pretty , or sexy, or anything else in the world you don't want to be," her father said. (p.194).

Problem-solving ability is another attribute of Myers' characters. Paul Williams and his friends, the "Action Gang," get more than they anticipate when they take on a slum landlord in The Young Landlords. Their protests result in the apartment owner giving them the property to manage themselves. The problems of maintenance are exacerbated by an array of eccentric tenants. The group learns some lessons about responsibility and commitment, and Paul acquires an understanding of leadership. Paul comments:

> I had wanted the fun of owning a place, but I hadn't wanted the responsibility. But even that wasn't as important as having the responsibility and being faced with the idea of wanting to give it up. I learned a lot from the Joint about people, how they lived and all, which was basically

> cool. I learned to accept the idea that answers were a lot easier to come by when you stood across the street from the problem. What was a lot harder to accept was that there weren't good answers to every problem, and when there weren't good answers you had to make do the best you could."(p. 196).

Bishop reminds readers that two of Myers' major strengths are humor and ability to create narrative and dialogue that are natural. In the critically acclaimed Fast Sam, Cool Clyde and Stuff, humor is interwoven among episodes of young love, street games, teen-age adventure and among the serious themes of death, drug addiction and school failure. Stuff's gentle cleverness makes him the perfect vehicle for narrative. In one funny episode he describes a dance contest in which Clyde disguises himself as a girl to dance with Sam because none of the girls is available or acceptable. Sam and Clyde win the contest and the fifty-dollar prize only to lose them when Clyde fights off the advances of another dancer.

**Father-son relationships.** Father-son relationships are prominent in several Myers' novels, sometimes contending with peer groups for influence on the lives of youth. Christenbury (1980) observed that Myers' protagonists are often "guided by parents who, refreshingly, behave and talk very much like all parents . . . and who give their children not only sufficient material well-being but also stability and affection." (p. 3)

It is in books revealing these relationships that he makes particularly important contributions, letting readers know that while some African-American youth--just as some youth from other ethnic groups--do indeed grow up in single parent families where the father is absent, not all do, and even absent fathers can care

about their children and want to maintain or reestablish relationships. The fathers in The Young Landlords and Won't Know 'til I Get There exemplify what Bishop identifies as an important Myers contribution:

> images of the Black male as father. . . . They are not perfect: they do not always say the right things, and their lecturing may be ineffective. But unlike Black fathers in many urban novels of the seventies, these fathers have not abandoned their families; they are working to support them. They care about what their sons are doing, and when the chips are down, they are there to provide support and guidance. They offer glimpses into what it means to become a Black man and a responsible and loving parent. They represent Myers's version of the everyday kind of hero. (pp. 35-36)

Bishop focuses on successful parents in four novels. We believe, however, Myers demonstrates that even fathers who have not regularly fulfilled responsibilities as parents can and do make discernible efforts to reach out to their sons, to share a bit of what they have learned, and to have their sons learn from the fathers' experiences.

The fathers in Somewhere in the Darkness and It Ain't All for Nothin' make some effort to relate to their sons, to be better fathers, and to share brief glimpses of unfulfilled dreams. These two novels are particularly noteworthy as they look at fathers seeking variously to establish relationships with their sons after long absences.

Somewhere in the Darkness features 10th grader Jimmy Little and his father, Crab. Crab has escaped after nine years in prison. He wants to reclaim Jimmy, to show him--through a trip south before Crab dies of kidney disease--that his father amounts to something, and that he is innocent of the murder charges brought against him.

Jimmy's mother died when he was quite young, and he has been

raised by her mother--Mama Jean. He reluctantly accompanies Crab on a journey from Harlem, first to Chicago, and then to Crab's hometown in Arkansas. Myers presents Crab with depth and human dimension, revealing Crab's struggle to earn Jimmy's love and respect. He tells Jimmy about segregation, introduces him to the Conjure Man, gives him a taste of small town life in the south. Jimmy struggles with his feelings:

> He wanted to grow up, to be grown, to have a mind that had answers where his own mind had questions. He didn't look at Crab, but knew he was there from the tug of the barbed wire silence strung between them. His heart beat quickly, as if he had been running, and he felt as if he had been running, running to catch the shadow of what could have been. (p. 158)

Jimmy, who is with Crab when he dies, subsequently reflects on what he wants to pass on to a son he may have:

> He thought about what he would do with the child if he were a boy. He wouldn't know much about getting money to buy food for him, or what things to tell him to do except to be good and not get into trouble. But he would tell him all the secrets he knew, looking right into his eyes and telling him nothing but the truth so that every time they were together they would know things about each other. That way there would be a connection, he thought, something that would be there even when they weren't together. He would know just how he was like his son, and how they were different, and where their souls touched and where they didn't. He knew if he ever had a son he would have to do it right away, and all the time, because sooner or later there wouldn't be enough days left to fit the meaning in. (p. 167)

How differently Crab deals with Jimmy from the way Lonnie treats Tippy in <u>It Ain't All for Nothin'</u>. Lonnie never wanted Tippy and, after Tippy's mother died, he left Tippy to be brought up by Grandma Carrie.

Grandma Carrie raises Tippy with a sense of pride, demonstrated by her own work ethic and determination to make her way without handouts. Yet her age and illness make her dependent

on social security, and she must reluctantly resort to welfare when the social security checks are late. After working hard all her life, she cries in frustration at a system that is so humiliating and unfair. When her illness and aging progress enough that she must be hospitalized, Grandma Carrie has no choice but to send Tippy to Lonnie.

Lonnie doesn't change his ways, although he pays intermittent attention to Tippy. He also involves Tippy in life on the margin. Grandma Carrie has made faith an important part of Tippy's life. After Lonnie has made him participate in a holdup, Tippy, who is not catholic, goes to a catholic church to try to confess. In reaching out to God, however, Tippy is rebuffed by the priest who violates confidentiality, calls the police and sends older boys to forcibly detain Tippy. Eventually escaping, Tippy thinks,

> God, that just ain't right. I didn't do nothing wrong and You know that. How come You doing me wrong? You got Grandma Carrie sick and in the hospital acting funny, You got my father doing bad things and nothing bad is happening to him, and I'm doing pretty good and everything bad is happening to me. This is me, God, this is Tippy. I ain't done nothing wrong!
>
> I knew God could just strike me down dead or turn me into salt like He did somebody, but I was just so mad I didn't know what to do. I hung out in Lonnie's room and watched television, and then he came home. He said hi and I said hi. Then he came over to me and put his hand under my chin and push my face up and looked at it.
>
> "What happened?"
>
> "I had a fight with some boys". [p. 64]

Lonnie wants to know why the boys beat Tippy. When Tippy tells him, Lonnie himself beats Tippy, saying he'll kill him if the cops come.

Tippy realizes he must get away from his father or, like him,

be trapped in small time criminal activities. He learns that one doesn't have to be a "bad" parent. Later Lonnie is arrested, tried, and convicted. Tippy visits him ir jail:

> I looked up at him and saw his face was sad and he was trying to get up a smile, but it wasn't coming too easy. I figured he must have planned what he was going to say, but it still didn't make it easy. [pp. 157]

After a few moments of awkward conversation, Lonnie, who is not sure himself that if he were released now he wouldn't be back in jail eventually, tells Tippy to stay out of trouble. Tippy responds,

> "I ain t coming here. You don't have to tell me nothing because I ain't coming here."
>
> "I guess you ain't," he said. He reached out his hand like he was going to touch me or something, and then he pulled back. "You going to write to me? I got to let everybody know I got me a big son out here on the street."
>
> "This guy you staying with..." Whatever it was he was going to say he couldn't get it out. "Maybe when I get out of here we can get a little something going. I don't mean no father or son thing--it don't have to be nothing like that. Maybe we could just get together."
>
> He looked up past me, and I turned and saw the guard pointing to his watch, and then Lonnie stood up and I stood up and he reached out and took my hand and we shook. It wasn't much, but it was all we could do.
>
> "A father and son thing would be okay," I said.
>
> Lonnie went to the door with the guard, and then he turned back and I could see his face was wet, and he gave me a little wave. Then the door closed, and he was gone.
>
> I write to Lonnie and he writes back to me. Sometimes I really look forward to getting his letters and I wonder why, because he hurt me more than anybody I know. I guess it's because he's my father and I want him and me to be okay, and maybe, when he gets out, we can get together like he said. And even if I feel, deep inside, that it really ain't going to be that way, I'm still hoping. [p. 158-159]

We believe that Myers demonstrates the powerful forces of

fatherhood at work not only in Black males who meet the typical perception of successful parent, but also in those Black males who run into trouble with the law and who have generally demonstrated a willingness to let grandmothers like Mama Jean and Grandma Carrie raise their sons. It is in this dimension of human character that Myers makes a major contribution to literature and to societal understanding. Crab reaches out to Jimmy, tries to teach him a bit about life, and strives to clear his name for Jimmy's sake. The jailed Lonnie doesn't want Tippy to repeat the father's mistakes. Thus, Jimmy and Tippy learn much from their fathers, and in the process become not only stronger but determined not to put themselves in the positions that trapped their fathers. As Tippy notes, "I'm still hopin'" and Jimmy "knew if he ever had a son he would have to do it right away, and all the time, because sooner or later there wouldn't be enough days to fit the meaning in."

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The values which permeate all of Myers' works are those we wish all young adults would acquire. Myers emphasizes good friendships with peers and with significant older adults. He shows a variety of family units which contain at least one loving and stable caregiver. He reflects the values of truth and honesty even in the face of racial bigotry. He allows his characters to experience love and sexual awakening, but he warns the reader against irresponsible sex and its unhappy consequences. Myers' message to young adults seems to be: discover your strengths, be proud of who you are and be responsible for your actions.